Theses and Dissertations   Graduate School

2011

Resolution

Jason Robinson
Virginia Commonwealth University

RESOLUTION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011
BA, Pennsylvania State University, 2001

Major Director: Bob Paris
Associate Professor, Department of Kinetic Imaging

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May 2011

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This paper is an exploration of the concepts and motivations behind the video

installation and performance that made up my MFA Thesis Exhibition. My

primary interest as a filmmaker is in the "invisible art" of editing. In my practice I

employ iconic imagery, such as old home movies and classic Hollywood films, as

my source material. This "found footage" is deconstructed, drastically altered,

and reassembled into a new movie that tells my story while still maintaining the

memory of the original images. My process and philosophy concerning the

salvage and repurposing of video is analyzed and discussed. I also examine my

experience in translating video editing into a live improvisational performance.

Introduction

       In the production of a narrative film, first an idea is developed into a script. The script is then broken down into storyboards. The storyboards are shot, and finally the footage is edited into a finished movie. While I am oversimplifying an incredibly complex process, that is the basic order of operations. My interest in filmmaking has always been focused on the craft of editing. This obsession with montage—what Sergei Eisenstein called "the nerve of cinema"—lead me to adapt this process to my creative strengths and shift my focus to post-production. Skipping the meticulous planning of pre-production, I took my loaded camera out into the world and shot whatever happened to catch my eye. With a significant amount of footage amassed I could approach this like a sculptor would a mound of clay: chipping away until I found the contours and shapes of my film within the hulking mass of visual data. This suited me much better than the traditional method I was initially taught. I realized I could simplify my process one step further after intercepting a box of 16mm NASA educational films en route to a school dumpster. Abandoning the camera altogether I could instead gather

interesting source material from home movies; garage sales, Internet video archives and wherever moving images were available. My video projects were only limited by what I could find. There is a unique challenge inherent in deconstructing someone else's vision and reassembling it into my own. Appropriation also allowed me to circumvent sets, actors, equipment, production schedules and all other aspects of filmmaking that require heavy lifting and creative compromise, in favor of a dark editing suite and absolute creative control.

The use of appropriated imagery was an integral part of my artistic practice by the time I started my graduate studies at VCU, but I was looking for ways to approach the medium from a new direction. *Resolution* and *OUT West* are the creative results of nearly two years of exploring new methods of process and presentation in the repurposing of found footage. *Resolution* is a study in the materiality of analog videotape. It is an attempt to push past the "found" quality into a suspended void of overlapping layers of rhythm and texture. *OUT West* is a meditation on the American landscape told through an improvised, collaborative performance created entirely from the films of the late 1960's Spaghetti Western. Though completely different in their sources and presentation, both videos attempt to re-imagine the process of transforming pre-existing material through editing.

Resolution

Installed in the Anderson Gallery as one half of my thesis show, *Resolution* represents the culmination of several paths of process and theme I have followed since the beginning of my graduate studies. The core of my artistic practice for the last ten years has been the digital manipulation of appropriated or "found" footage. In previous projects I have mined public domain educational films, Hollywood blockbusters, and other pop culture ephemera as source material. *Resolution* is composed from a two-minute section of home video that my father shot in 1989. While living in California we took a day trip to the Santa Cruz beach boardwalk. I have a distant memory of standing next to him on a scenic overlook while he videotaped a group of surfers riding the cold December waves. I had not thought about the events of that trip until a few months ago when I came across the footage while digitally archiving some old home movies. Although I scanned through almost 15 hours of recorded family memories, those surfers were the images that stuck with me. In the following weeks I returned to the scene many times. I watched the surfers rhythmically ride the waves effortlessly until some invisible force broke their connection, plunging

them into an engulfing sea, only to reemerge seconds later and begin the

process again. To understand the scene and examine their movements as

closely as possible, I slowed the footage down to a fraction of the original speed

and zoomed in as far as possible until the tiny surfers filled the entire frame.

Figure 1: Unaltered video still from *Resolution* source footage

Respecting Constraints

In the nonlinear editing software that I use, Final Cut Pro, a video image can be scaled up to 1000% of its original size so that only a few pixels of the original fills the screen. In my work I often create self imposed rules and constraints to help focus my decisions. For example, in my 2010 video installation *Calli Nectes*—another ocean-themed examination of movement in nature—I reduced the speed of the video to 6.73%, the slowest that Final Cut Pro would allow. I could have easily subverted this technical restriction, but I chose to respect the limits of the program, considering them a border to my play rather than a barrier to my process. I have always embraced a philosophy of self-imposed limits, perhaps because I chose to enter a technologically driven artistic practice at a time when I had minimal resource. I believe constraints—self-imposed or otherwise—provide both an essential focus to my process and a welcome creative spark. Wired Magazine's creative director Scott Dadich remarked,

"The worst thing a designer can hear is an offhand 'Just do whatever you want.' That's because designers understand the power of limits. Constraint offers an unparalleled opportunity for growth and innovation…. given fewer resources, you have to make better decisions."[1]

With the scale of the Santa Cruz footage pushed to its absolute limit the video image lost much of its context and moved toward the uncanny. The surfers were transformed into hunched phantoms like creatures moving with an inhuman fluidity, divorced from gravity. Their appearance is reminiscent of the blurry video figures often construed as evidence of Bigfoot sightings by pranksters and conspiracy theorists. I am similarly reminded of "the creature" from Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2010 masterpiece, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. In *Uncle Boonme,* a surrealist Buddhist fantasy, "the creature" is a physical representation of a long lost child, a memory that has assumed a physical form. In *Resolution* the surfers are likewise a distant memory—mutated form over time.

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[1] Scott Dadich, "Design Under Constraint: How Limits Boost Creativity," *Wired Magazine*, February 23, 2009
http://www.wired.com/culture/design/magazine/17-03/dp_intro.

Figure 2: Promotional image from *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010)*

Representing Memory

My initial exploration of the footage was guided by the idea of the birth/death/re-birth cycle that surfers experienced in the waves. However, after heavy processing of the imagery, another theme emerged. The massively exaggerated scale revealed a texture in the waves and forced the ocean surrounding the surfers to become something else, a new kind of sea, a blinding white digital ether that both carries and threatens to consume its passengers. The surfers (who were not simply surfers anymore) were no longer surrounded by water but instead by videotape broken down to its tiniest particles. This fabric—the building blocks, of the analog image—was now visible. I believe videotape is a physical representation of a memory, a visual reference to a time passed. By slowing the footage down and zooming in as far as possible, I was getting inside of a memory; something that can only be done in dreams. In fact the visual result of this experiment was an image looking as though it emerged from a dream.

Figure 3: Video still from *Resolution*

Processing the footage changed it into something new, but it was still raw material. It was not yet mine. I feel there is a responsibility when working with appropriated images to establish a creative ownership of the source. Since I had no participation in shooting the original footage, I had to find another way to assure that my creative influence would be present in every second of the work. In *Resolution* I did this by manually adjusting the motion, blur, color and

sharpness of each frame of the video. Though I am editing in a purely digital

workspace, the technique of altering the image frame-by-frame shares a

connection to the works of two of my greatest artistic influences, Stan Brakhage

and Len Lye. Their style of animated films, created through painting, drawing,

scratching or otherwise altering the film stock by hand completely changed my

perception of what filmmaking could be. My techniques as a digital video artist

are heavily informed by their blue-collar craftsman approach to creating

experimental moving images.

Figure 4: Video still 2 from *Resolution*

Fetishized Technology

The VHS tape has recently crossed the line from outdated and ignored

formats to fetishized technology for its vintage look and feel. It holds a powerful

nostalgic association for many as a relic from another time and a symbol of

childhood. This is typical of the lifespan of many consumer-media formats from

vinyl records to Super 8 film. Most begin their life as a celebrated advance in

consumer technology, overpriced and desired by many. Then they become a

"must have" product for most mainstream consumers. Slowly they fall out of

favor as they become replaced by newer and more advanced equipment. The

product experiences a dark age where they are largely forgotten, populating

garage sales and surplus equipment closets. After years as an unwanted

commodity they reemerge as a tool of artists and tastemakers, a symbol of

hipness reborn. Music videos and video art are currently the two largest

purveyors of the modern rebirth of the VHS aesthetic.

In the 1980's and 90's many parents thoroughly documented the lives of

their children with camcorders and then played the tapes for relatives and friends

throughout the years. To many people in their twenties and thirties, the grainy

image and scan lines of a VHS tape is how a memory appears. As a result, the

use of VHS footage in 2011 can feel like a cheap grab at empty nostalgia

directed toward a generation of people already thoroughly obsessed with their

younger selves. I am at least partially guilty of participating in this trend by using

a twenty-year-old VHS tape as my source material; however, my intention was to

avoid the nostalgia trap and push past the current popular aesthetic while still

addressing the evolution of our recorded memories.

Figure 5: Video still 3 from *Resolution*

Sound Montage

As I edited the video for *Resolution* I began to plan the sound design. I always work visually, so the audio is usually the last and most difficult part of my process. My goal was to create a soundscape that anchored the visuals and complimented the images without overpowering them. I did not want the sound to falsely lead the audience into an emotional space that the visuals were not going to. Inspired by projecting the video, I decided to create an aural experience that simulated the flickering glow of the video bouncing off of the white walls of the gallery space.

No other aspect of my craft as a video artist has experienced more of a leap in technical competency and conceptual development than in sound. After four semesters of sound intensive seminars, production classes, as well as my day-to-day experience of working with truly gifted sound artists, I have gained the technical knowledge to create the sounds I hear in my head to compliment my images. Prior to my graduate immersion in Sound Art all of the audio in my work was created through the same process of montage I usually follow when creating moving visuals. I would cut, paste, alter and layer found sounds into a collage

that complimented my video. Though I have not abandoned this technique, I am now able to generate my own sounds through music production software and field recordings.

In designing the sounds for *Resolution*, I watched the video on a constant loop while playing a series of tones on virtual synthesizers in the audio production software Ableton Live. After recording approximately thirty minutes of audio I edited and layered select sounds from the session in sync with the video. The low tidal roar that plays throughout the piece was created by drastically altering the speed and pitch of a performance by the hardcore punk band Some Girls. The result is a different kind of white noise, a hollow echo of glacially shifting tones that moves back and forth between beauty and anxiety.

OUT West

OUT West is a semi-improvised, collaborative audiovisual live performance that uses the archetypes of the Spaghetti Western as building blocks to re-imagine the American landscape. The footage is pulled from a range of films from the heyday of the genre (1967-1969), but the majority of the performance consists of scenes from Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*—hence the title *O(nce) U(pon a) T(ime in the) West.* A primary motivation for selecting Spaghetti Westerns as source material was an interest in the sweeping panoramic vistas that often characterize the films of this genre. After further study of a wide selection of the era's most classic movies, I was also reminded of a tendency by the film's editor's to balance these landscapes with extreme close-ups of faces. The earliest edits of *OUT West* depended heavily on drawing connections between these two seemingly opposed shots. Earlier in the semester I had the honor of participating in a class discussion with Vito Acconci about his 1976 performance art epic *The Red Tapes*. Acconci mentioned he considered a close up of a heroic sheriff's sunburned face as much as a landscape as a wide-angle shot of a dusty village. I had been unconsciously

pursuing this concept with the imagery in *OUT West*, but this statement helped

me realize exactly what it was I was doing. A landscape does not require land to

exist. The crags of a villain's face can hold the same depth of topographic forms

and patterns as a dried up riverbed. This reexamination of cinematic language

has become a major theme in my performances, and an idea I strive to convey to

the audience. While developing *OUT West* I explored the evolution of the VJ and

live video performance as well as the history and theory of improvisation in

experimental music.

Figure 6: Video still 1 from *OUT West*

Live Cinema

As a life long fan of Hip Hop, using found footage also appealed to my interest in remix culture. My first introduction to the idea of a VJ—a rave DJ creating live visuals, often from found footage as an accompaniment to music—piqued my curiosity. However, the images seemed to function more as flashy wallpaper than a true collaboration. It was several years later when I saw two very similar live performances that pushed the role of a VJ much more into cinematic territory that I began to see a connection to the work I was making and the work I wanted to make: Simon Tarr's *Tia Mak*, a live visual remix of Nanook of the North and DJ Spooky's (aka Paul D Miller) *Rebirth of a Nation*, a similar repurposing of Birth of a Nation. Both performances turned a critical lens to their respective source materials. Traditional club VJs mix, degrade and distort visual signals. They are manipulators of video in its rawest form and their imagery is often wed to a rhythm outside of their control. Tarr and Miller infused a driving narrative into their live video performances supported by the use of a cinematic language. This auteur style of VJ'ing is often referred to as "live cinema" and its practitioners are known as "visualists."

Figure 7: Video still 2 from *OUT West*

Inspired by these performances I developed my own collaborative visualist performance with sound artist and fellow Kinetic Imaging graduate student Nathan Halverson. Immediately upon embarking on this creative journey some important questions were raised: What is the point of performing a video live? What does editing in real time add to the experience of an audience watching a movie? My initial interest in performative video stemmed from an idea to make something that was alive, an evolving work that changed over time and could be

adapted to venues, audiences and moods. When I produce a single channel

video, the picture and sound are locked. They stay that way forever. The video

that screens at the Ann Arbor Film Festival is the same video that screens at the

Virginia Film Festival. Performing my work live has allowed me to develop a

video over time, editing it again and again, seeing what worked and incorporating

feedback from a number of audiences. When Nathan and I both feel like this

project has run its course, and we no longer feel the need to perform or develop

it any further, our plan is to create a single channel version of the movie. The

video will not be a replacement for documentation of the performances, which we

have as well; but a final product, an end result of our collaboration. While each

performance is a complete artistic work, they also serve as sketches for the final

edit.

Working in a live environment has also given me the opportunity to

incorporate elements unique to a live setting and embrace a level of interactivity

unavailable in normal practice. Recently, I have begun mixing real time video of

both performers and audience members into the live edit. I have also

implemented a system of video feedback, using a camera to record the images

projected on the screen and then looping them back onto the screen instantly.

The live performance opens up a wealth of options for generating and distorting

moving images in real time. Other techniques for live video manipulation noted

as possibilities for future performances include (but are not limited to):

incorporating actors, smoke, fog, lasers and altering the projection surfaces.

Figure 8: Video still 3 from *OUT West*

The Laptop as Instrument

Laptop musicians have always battled against a bias in live performance settings. When someone is playing a guitar, especially in a rock band, it is a physical act of dexterity that can be passionate, sweaty, cathartic, and sexy. Anyone of equal or greater musicianship can be using a laptop as their instrument, playing an extremely complex piece, and look as if they are checking their email. Since I am using a laptop to run VDMX, my live video editing software, I was forced to confront this classic conundrum of modern electronic performers. Though this is an issue that is far from resolved for me personally, I first confronted it by switching from the laptop interface to a midi controller of sliders, knobs, and a Nintendo Wii remote. Asked about the importance of incorporating physicality into a laptop-based performance, electronic musician Tim Exile remarked,

"I've noticed that audiences respond well when they make connections between movements and sounds which they've never made before. So if they can see you directly controlling a sound structure, which they'd, only heard devoid from its kinetic correlate before (a lot of electronic sounds) then they will have a transformative experience." [2]

 While hopefully looking slightly more interesting to the audience, the midi controller has also made my editing significantly faster and more precise.

New ways to answer the question "Why live?" are still surfacing as I continue to develop the piece past my thesis. Above all, my main reason for doing this is the challenge. I want to develop my skills as a visual artist. I want to make smarter work. This project has challenged me conceptually, technically, and creatively. I have almost no live performance background, so forcing myself to edit in front of people has been a very unique experience. In addition, I had to learn VDMX myself, apiece of software with a steep learning curve.

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[2] Primus Luta, "Take it to the Stage: Reflections on Live Laptop Music from Artists," Create Digital Music, July 21, 2009
http://createdigitalmusic.com/2009/07/take-it-to-the-stage-reflections-on-live-laptop-music-from-artists/

Improvisation

Another significant creative challenge of *OUT West* has been an exploration of improvisation. I am not a musician and I have almost no experience with live performance and absolutely none regarding improvised performance. Nathan and I have known from the beginning that we wanted this project to follow an outline, but to be loose enough to allow for improvised moments. My inexperience with the software and general performance anxiety prevented any real successful moments of prolonged improvisation during the first several months of our collaboration. I was so locked into getting the basic structure correct that I was never able to relax enough to listen to Nathan's sounds and react spontaneously. I broke through this mental wall for the first time in February 2011 after I agreed to provide visuals for an experimental music house show in Washington DC. The performers were friends and the audience was small, so the mood was relaxed. Forced to listen to the music, I was able to truly improvise my visuals because I had no idea what the performers would play or what they would sound like until I was hearing it. My performance was not particularly special, but it was adequate and I proved to myself that I was capable

of relaxing, listening and reacting. Shortly thereafter Nathan sent me this quote

from an essay in Christoph Cox's *Audio Culture* that succinctly explained some of

the realizations I starting to have about performance.

> a. Have fun with this material and don't get hung up on any one area.
> b. Don't misuse this material to have only "correct" performances without spirit or risk.
> c. Each performance must have something unique.
> d. Finally, I recommend as few rehearsals as possible so everyone will be slightly nervous.
>
> Good Luck,
> Anthony Braxton
> Mills College 1988
>
> P.S. (and please don't make the music too "cutesy") [3]

With these thoughts in mind, we stopped "sticking to the script" when practicing

and forced ourselves to have fun. At some point I believe our practices were

making the performance worse. We were almost too good. When we showed it to

people the reaction was positive, but the work had stopped evolving and we

knew it. After incorporating some of the ideas that were generated in a looser,

more experimental practice, the piece came alive again.

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[3] Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music (New York: Continuum, 2004), 204.*

As a continuously evolving performance, the themes of *OUT West* are also in a constant state of flux. The ability to adapt the mood of the piece to different venues and audiences—as well as my own personal mood and whims—is one of the main reasons I initiated the project. I can switch the tone from somber and slow moving to quick and whimsical with only minimal preparation and communication to my collaborator.

 As a performance, *OUT West* has yet to be fully resolved. When it does feel "right" it will be edited into a single channel video and retired as a live piece. Until then we will continue to perform it and watch it evolve.

Conclusion

I am an editor. My interest in the cinematic arts is primarily rooted in the postproduction manipulation of moving images. The trajectory that my work has followed during my time as a graduate student at VCU has been dedicated to thoroughly exploring the technical and conceptual basis of this fascination. Found or appropriated footage has been the material that I have used to conduct these experiments in time, texture, and chance. *Resolution* and *Out West* are the culmination of two separate yet parallel paths of study into the deconstruction of the found image. Both strive to summon the uncanny from the mundane by breaking down familiar imagery (an old western and a home movie of a beach vacation) and rebuilding them as critical mediations on their source material.

Vita

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EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts in Kinetic Imaging
Virginia Commonwealth University
May 2011

Bachelor of Arts in Film and Video
Minor English
Pennsylvania State University
May 2001

SELECTED EXHIBITS AND INSTALLATIONS

2011   *Let There Be Light*, Piedmont Valley Community College, Charlottesville, VA.
2011   Chroma Projects, Charlottesville, VA.
2011   *MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
2011   *Art Everywhere*, Norfolk, VA (w/ Video Gang)
2011   *Light It Up*, Washington DC
2011   *New Waves*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
2010   *New Work by Robinson and Vitale.* FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA.
2010   *GLI.TC/H*, Chicago, Illinios.
2010   *Lumen Video Art Festival*, Staten Island, NY.
2010   *In Tension*: *Kinetic Imaging MFA Candidacy Exhibition*, ISHQ Gallery, Richmond, VA.
2009   *Halvorson and Sons*, FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA

SELECTED SCREENINGS

2011 ARTGREASE TV, Buffalo, NY.
2011 FEEDBACK: Video By Artists Richmond, VA
2010 Cinesonika, Vancouver, BC.
2010 Virginia Film Festival, Charlottesville, VA.
2010 University Film and Video Association Conference, Burlington, VT.
2010 Flanuer Film Festival, UK.

AWARDS

2011 Honorable Mention *New Waves*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
2010 Leford Graduate Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University.
2010 Graduate Travel Grant Award for University Film and Video Conference presentation and screening, Burlington, VT.
2010 Winner Best Non Linear Film, Flaneur Film Festival 2010

TEACHING

2010-2011 Instructor, "Introduction to Video Art," Virginia Commonwealth University
2010 Instructor, "The Art of the Documentary," Virginia Commonwealth University
2009 Teachning Assistant, "Video 1," Virginia Commonwealth University